Research Roundup: Meaning-making in bereavement and grief

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The focus on meaning-making in loss (Neimeyer, 2001) reflects increasing use of qualitative methods to study how individuals and groups experience bereavement. Adopting a relativist, constructivist ontology, a qualitative lens foregrounds the variety of ways people interpret and find meaning within the everyday flow of events, speech and behaviour, or discursive activity, through which we define and structure our social reality (Berger and Luckman, 1967). In analysing qualitative data we come to appreciate the complex relationship between individual and social processes, the human capacity for agency in difficult situations, and how we act on the basis of meaning (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 9). This approach represents a shift from meaning-making based on internal, psychological compulsion to meaning as socially and culturally shaped. The analytic task then becomes one of discovering the 'strange' in the familiar to gain an appreciation of how 'common sense' experiences are not as self-evident as they may seem, but have been shaped by cultural meaning systems

While providing a methodological lens to study how individuals engage with specific types of loss, meaning-making in bereavement is also a topic of investigation, which has been theorised as central to grieving (Neimeyer 2001; Park, 2010). For example, Niemeyer's 'meaning- reconstruction', or the attempt to reaffirm a world of meaning threatened by loss, includes sense-making, benefit finding and identity change (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Park's meaning-making model describes how meaning is lost, searched for and found, the outcome being meanings made. This model has sought to bridge the gap between a more 'global sense of meaning' in life and a 'situational sense of meaning' disrupted by loss. Further, given meaning-making's socio-cultural shaping, its study in diverse contexts can illuminate different cultural responses to contemporary societal conditions and the issues these raise for the experience of death and loss. Yet, the focus on cultural diversity both within and between cultures has been limited, definitions of meaning-making in bereavement tending to uncritically assume mainstream western perspectives. Of the relatively few studies showing cultural sensitivity I review three, which capture the complex interplay of situational and global, micro and macro, individual and cultural dimensions to extend our understanding of meaning-making in loss.

1. **Wojtkowiak, J. Vanherf, N. C. and Schuhmann, C. M. (2018) Grief in a biography of losses: Meaning-making in hard drug users' grief narratives on drug-related death.** ***Death Studies*** **DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2018.1456708**

This study focuses on a relatively hidden and marginalised culture in the Netherlands having received little attention in the bereavement field. Yet, the group's exposure to the possibility of death and bereavement is higher than average, raising the question, "What insights about grieving as a "process of reconstructing a world of meaning" can be drawn from grief narratives of hard drug users concerning loss associated with drug use (p. 2)?" Of particular interest was how far bereaved drug-users managed or failed to find meaning in their loss in an "extreme" social context in being problematic and stigmatised.

In semi-structured interviews with 10 male drug-users, aged 18 to 59, bereaved by a partner or close friend's drug-related death, interviewees were asked about the relationship with the deceased, the griever's reaction, and how they felt about the loss today. A thematic analysis of the data, linking findings to the literature on meaning-making, particularly Park's (2010) model, identified a multi-dimensional and layered process, some layers resulting in meanings made and others not. These layers were captured by 4 inter-related themes:

1. *Inhibited and fragmented grief due to drug use*. Drug users acknowledged some aspects of the loss and denied others, for example, experiencing anger, while sadness remained inhibited. While the loss could be experienced as disruptive and painful at an emotional level, emotional meaning-making was inhibited by drug use.
2. *A social context of disenfranchisement*. Drug uses were either excluded or excluded themselves from socially shared moments of mourning, such as avoiding the funeral for fear of being unwelcome.
3. *Death accepted as a natural part of life.* As part of the culture of drug use, these multiple losses did not challenge drug users' core beliefs about life and death. Rather death acceptance formed part of their global meaning system, with no need for extensive meaning-making of death in general or their own mortality.
4. *Experiencing meaningfulness in a biography of losses.* In relation to multiple losses, drug users repeatedly emphasised experiencing their lives as meaningful. However, at the same time, their sense of meaning did not encompass the future, either for themselves or their relationships. Rather, a biography of losses cannot encompass Park's subjective sense of meaning, "deriving from seeing one's actions as oriented towards a desired future state…" (2010: 258).

These themes were found to shed light on some unresolved issues, including how situational and global meanings interrelate and influence each other; the role of cognitive versus affective dimensions of meaning-making; and whether meaning is "a by-product of living in cultures that provide extensive choice and leisure time" (Park, 2017:72), that is, a privilege or a universal human concern. The findings suggest global meaning systems of hard drug users reflect a biography of losses and are

characterised by death acceptance and absence of future-oriented goals; familiarity with loss was a protective factor at a cognitive but not an emotional level; and meaning-making occurs in contexts other than those representing the economically privileged middle-classes. These findings emphasise the complexity and non-linearity of meaning-making in loss, not only in how it unfolds over time, but also the multiple layers involved. Therefore we should avoid translating ideas about success or failure of meaning-making into ideas of success or failure in grieving.

2. **Steffen, E. and Coyle, A. (2017) ''I thought they should know . . . that daddy is not completely gone'': A Case Study of Sense-of-Presence Experiences in Bereavement and Family Meaning-Making. *Omega Journal of Death and Dying*, 74(4) 363-385. DOI: 10.1177/0030222816686609**

This study focuses on family meaning-making in the UK to capture generational diversity in experiences of sense-of-presence, contributing unexpected findings. Bereaved family members included a mother, her daughter and two sons following the husband's/father's death. The authors explored two main questions: 1. What role (s), if any, might sense of presence experiences play in a bereaved family? 2. How do family members experience and make (shared) sense of this phenomenon? In addressing these they foregrounded the relationship and discrepancies between micro and macro social discourses/tendencies, including disruptions and discontinuities between personal and communal narratives related to sensing the deceased's presence.

The research involved a single-case study design, including individual and group qualitative interviewing and ethnographic elements, enabling a situated representation of sense-of-presence. The initial two hour group interview focused mainly on explaining sense of presence experiences following the death. A pluralistic approach to data analysis allowed both phenomenological and social constructionist readings of the interviews to capture 1. The specific cultural context from the insider's perspective; 2. A discursive understanding to highlight how family members established their accounts as credible and warded off alternative interpretations. In the particular case of one family of non-British White Central European origin, the findings have illuminated how wider macro-social tendencies around sense-of-presence are played out at local level.

Thus, the authors found divergence between the mother deriving much personal benefit and comfort from sensing her husband's presence, and her children dismissing such experience as incompatible with a more culturally dominant, rationalist, scientific worldview with which they identified and made sense of their father's death. The ethnographic data, including attending a church, playing a board game at home, and visiting an historical site that had been special to the father, confirmed the division in meaning-making between the mother and her children. This division found expression in generational and cultural as well as temperament differences, the mother socially constructed as more emotional and the children as more rational. In aligning themselves with a culturally dominant

explanatory framework, the children reinforced their challenge to their mother's more personal, 'irrational' meaning. In turn, the mother, while describing the details of her personal, subjective experience of her deceased husband's presence, conveyed the 'realness' and 'out-there-ness' of her experience.

On occasion the mother withdrew from her position following repeated challenges from her children. Yet she also hoped her children would understand things better when they were older, making sense of their position as arising from feeling confused. In this, the authors suggested the mother was articulating the outcome of the research: that is, sense of presence was not impacting the family as a whole, initially represented by the children's views and finally the mother's acknowledgement of her children being unable to share her perspective at this time. These findings show how wider macro-social perspectives may be played out at local level in sense-of-presence experiences being undermined by contemporary western scientific discourse. Previous research has identified these differences in interpretative frameworks, one representing a dominant culture of rationality and the other a minority culture of emotional expressiveness (See e.g. Bennett and Bennett, 2000). However, of the few studies of sense-of-presence experiences, this is the first to document how children found such experiences disturbing and in conflict with their world view.

3. **Kawashima, D. and Kawano, K. (2017) Meaning Reconstruction Process After Suicide: Life-Story of a Japanese Woman Who Lost Her Son to Suicide**. ***Omega Journal of Death and Dying***. **75(4) 360–375. DOI: 10.1177/0030222816652805**

This article reports on a qualitative, instrumental case study of suicide bereavement in Japan, the authors having previously investigated the topic (Kawashima et al., 2010) using a likert scale to measure the three activities of sense-making, benefit finding and identity change proposed by Gillies and Neimeyer (2006). In this study they aimed to identify qualitative aspects of meaning-reconstruction via a life-story interview with a middle-aged Japanese woman, Fumiko, bereaved by her son's suicide. Using a narrative approach to interviewing and data analysis, the two-hour interview was guided by questions about meaning-reconstruction, social support and secondary wounding (Karashima et al. 2010) inflicted by insensitive responses from others to the nature of the death. Three main narratives were found to act as scaffolds in Fumiko's meaning reconstruction: making sense of her son's death and life; relationships with other people; and reconstructing a bond with the deceased. The authors also identified Fumiko's use of socio-cultural frames of reference across the three narratives, with specific focus on how two Japanese folk images provided a further scaffold for her meaning-reconstruction. One image included *tsutsumu,* or 'wrapping', represented by the Kanji character for pregnant mother to convey the experience of the mother enfolding her child. The other was associated with *aida* or 'transitional', capturing selfhood as unstable, or being between self and other.

In examining the three narratives in light of cross-cultural differences reflected in *tsutsumu* and *aida,* the authors proposed a 'transitional and wrapping model' of grieving. This model reflects the importance of these images in understanding identity in Japan as intersubjective and floating, in contrast to the linear, progressive model of development associated with western cultures. Thus the self is kept warm and safe in the mother's womb, while also being able to float between the positions of the wrapping mother and the wrapped child. These images were deemed to reflect Fumiko's attempt to retrieve, maintain and protect her motherhood, including feeling responsible for her son's death and resolving to live with the pain for the rest of her life. At the same time they captured how she was able to shift her position to that of child in relation to her son. This latter position was assumed following a visit to a fortune teller, who advised Fumiko that the mother-child relationship had been reversed in a previous life and her son was keeping a benevolent parental eye on her. In narrating this story Fumiko conveyed how shifting from mother to child in relation to her deceased son was not an intentional change of position but rather a floating between positions in the transpersonal space of *aida.*

In proposing a transitional and wrapping model of grieving in suicide bereavement, the authors have shown how individual meaning-making is "not characterised by one coherent story but by complex and ongoing stories that involved conflicts and ambivalence" (p. 367). Each story was multi-voiced with alternative versions and connections to other stories, suggesting posttraumatic growth is far from coherent, for example, Fumiko enjoying memories of her son playing with other children, while experiencing sadness when seeing close families. Also some stories may be hidden and remain untold, leaving "holes in the narrative" (p. 367), as suggested by Fumiko's hesitation in narrating her experience of visiting a fortune teller, possibly due to strong feelings of responsibility as a mother or anticipating negative responses from others. The authors further suggested the model may have relevance to suicide bereaved mothers' narratives in western societies in how they construct meaning and maintain continuing bonds with their child.

Conclusion

These three studies contribute further understanding of both individual and family meaning-making. The study of bereaved hard drug-users points to meaning-making being universal rather than a privilege; their global meaning systems, in reflecting a biography of losses, being characterised by death acceptance and absence of future-oriented goals; and their grief including an aggregation of both successful and unsuccessful meaning-making attempts. The study of family meaning-making found dissonance between family members in understanding sense of presence. In identifying divergent interpretative frameworks, the authors illustrated the relationship between micro and macro levels with respect to contemporary valuing of scientific over supernatural explanations. The study of meaning-reconstruction in suicide bereavement in a non-western context identified a transitional and

wrapping model of grief in how a mother reconstructed a bond with her deceased son. Collectively the three studies have presented a complex multi-layered, multifaceted and shifting rather than coherent picture of meaning-making in bereavement and grief.

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